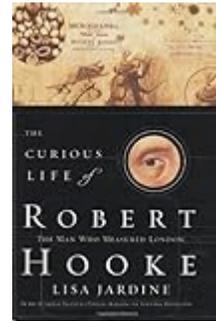




Lisa Jardine. *The Curious Life of Robert Hooke: The Man Who Measured London.* New York: Harper Collins, 2004. 432 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-053897-2.



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Robert Hooke: Experimenter as Anti-Hero

In spite of a flurry of research activity in recent years, Robert Hooke remains a relatively unknown figure in the English scientific revolution. Compared with Robert Boyle, Christopher Wren, Isaac Newton, or even Christiaan Huygens, Hooke's historical legacy seems very slight. Yet Hooke worked closely with Boyle and Wren, was the curator of experiments for the Royal Society for over thirty years, and arguably developed new and important theories and instruments in several natural philosophical fields, including optics, horology, and microscopy. What can account for this invisibility? Hooke came from a relatively humble background; he worked as a technician for Boyle and the Royal Society; his political and religious alliances seldom worked in his favor; and there is no major discovery that we can point to unambiguously as his alone. As well, he was inclined to take umbrage at slights and engaged in a number of priority disputes with important people, especially Newton and Huygens. By the end of his life, he was a bitter, delusional, almost friendless man, destroyed by the drugs he had taken throughout his life. But, according to Lisa Jardine's detailed and highly readable account of Hooke's life, probably the greatest cause for Hooke's

posthumous disappearance was his inability to say no to any new project that came his way. Hooke spent his life overextended, fitting at least three careers into the space most men allot for one. No wonder he needed to "self-medicate" to get through the day!

Jardine sets out to convince us that the man who claimed Newton had plagiarized the *Principia* is a man worth knowing, and that he was a skilled, enthusiastic, even brilliant member of the company of seventeenth-century virtuosi. By and large, she succeeds. Jardine traces Hooke's life, from his obscure childhood on the Isle of Wight, through his schooling in London and at Oxford, to his successful career in Restoration London. Hooke's time at Westminster School in London and Christ Church, Oxford, provided him with a good natural philosophical education, combined with high church and royalist proclivities and good practical knowledge of instrument construction. Soon after his arrival in Oxford, he was suggested as a laboratory assistant and amanuensis, first to John Willis and by 1655 to Robert Boyle. It was this connection with Robert Boyle that would ensure his participation in the explosion of interest in natu-

ral philosophy from the 1660s on. Hooke moved to London at the Restoration, where he became the curator of experiments for the newly formed Royal Society, probably on Boyle's recommendation. This position required that Hooke devise and demonstrate a new experiment every week. In 1665, Hooke was appointed Professor of Geometry at Gresham College, which allowed the Royal Society to meet at Gresham until his death in 1703. (At Hooke's death, the Royal Society was distressed to learn that they had no rights to their rooms in Gresham and that they were to be evicted. It took them until 1710 to find other quarters.)

In 1666, Hooke's life changed forever. The Great Fire of London resulted in a new career for Hooke as the surveyor of the City of London and as an architect and contractor in the rebuilding that followed for the next twenty years. Hooke immediately developed a plan for the rebuilding, and acted as the City of London's representative on an official Rebuilding Commission, which established the layout and rebuilding strategies and drew up the building regulations for an Act of Parliament. Throughout the rebuilding, Hooke was one of three people who were designated by the City to survey plots and settle boundary disputes. As well, Hooke became the first officer of Christopher Wren's architectural firm, which rebuilt all the major public buildings, including all the churches and many of the important secular halls as well. Wren and Hooke both designed new buildings, with Hooke in charge of the organization, contracts, etc., and a third man as the on-site coordinator. Hooke designed and built a number of private houses and public buildings, including the Royal College of Physicians, Bedlam Hospital, and Ralph Montague's house, which would later become the British Museum. Through this period, Hooke amassed a small fortune and became a prominent citizen of London.

Hooke was still drawn to the natural philosophical life, however, and so while he was surveying up to three hundred sites a year, dealing with dozens of disputes, designing, contracting, and building houses, he was still producing an experiment a week at the Royal Society, giving weekly lectures at Gresham College, and conducting his own and other Royal Society Fellows' experiments. No wonder he began to dose himself with various substances, to deal with his headaches and giddiness. Here, Jardine contends, lay the real source of Hooke's downfall. He was trying to do too many things, to be all things to all people, and he kept dropping the ball. Prob-

ably most damaging is the fact that he seldom carried through with his own projects, so that while he might feel he had demonstrated a new watch mechanism at the Royal Society, he never wrote it down, and therefore was unable to claim priority when a challenge was made. This was exacerbated by the fact that the Fellows of the Royal Society saw him as a paid technician, and often ignored his role in the experiments altogether. Thus, when Hooke called on the Society to recall his prior claims, they often had no memory of his actions.

There is no avoiding the fact that Hooke did get himself into a series of acrimonious disputes, all of which ended badly for him. He lacked diplomacy and was often willing to accuse fellow scientists of duplicity or theft, when this was probably not the case. With each dispute—with Christiaan Huygens concerning the design and patent of a spring-regulated watch, with Isaac Newton about whether Hooke had first thought of the inverse square law of gravity, with Newton and Huygens over experiments with optics—Hooke's supporters were fewer and the results more damaging. By the last dispute with Newton and Huygens, they did not even take Hooke seriously (although he was probably right). Jardine argues that Hooke's life might have had a different ending, both in his miserable lonely death, and in his posthumous fame, if he had had a family that could have supported him and fought for his proper credit. As it was, he died in his rooms in Gresham, alone and in squalor, intestate, but with an amassed fortune of over twelve thousand pounds.

This is a very compelling book. Once again, Jardine has given us a highly readable, well-researched and accessible view of the seventeenth-century natural philosophical community. Probably my largest criticism is that she has focused on the personal at the expense of the larger forces at work—that is, while she talks of Hooke's class, religious, and political affiliations, Hooke's successes and failures are for Jardine idiosyncratically his own. Still, this is a story that gives Robert Hooke his due, without whitewash, but without prejudice. Does it work? Is Hooke rehabilitated? In the end, Jardine is left with a man who never did the one great thing that would have forgiven all his faults. His personal foibles, with his status as an invisible technician and as a City man, rather than a gent, contributed to a life that became posthumously invisible. Hooke deserves to be part of the community of seventeenth-century natural philosophers and Jardine has placed him firmly where he belongs.

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